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A Thousand Days

Vietnam: The Fall Of Diem

A bewildering summer in Vietnam ended in a coup and the murder of Diem.

Nineteenth in a series.

By Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr.

Of all the problems Kennedy inherited none was more intractable than that of South Vietnam. Here the increasingly unpopular governments of Ngo Dinh Diem was under constant attack from a Communist-led guerrilla movement, the Vietcong. In an effort to strengthen the cause of Vietnamese independence, Kennedy in 1961 decided to send in a corps of American military and technical advisers.

During 1962 the new strategy seemed to be working. The Saigon government appeared to be recovering its authority. The Vietcong almost reached the point of giving up in the Mekong Delta and withdrawing to the mountains. But, under the surface, opposition to Diem was rising within his own army and government.

When Diem's troops fired at a Buddhist religious meeting in the spring of 1963, the resulting indignation shook the Diem regime. Ignoring American protests, Diem and his brother Ngo Dinh Nhu intensfied their repression of the Buddhists.

Bewildering Reports

The reports from Vietnam were bewildering. Our generals on the spot were unshakably optimistic; American newspapermen in Saigon were deeply pessimistic. The President sent a series of missions to Vietnam in an effort to find out the truth. One consisted of two old Vietnam hands, Gen. Victor Krulack of the Marines and Joseph Mendenhall of State, a Foreign Service officer.

After a frenzied weekend of inspection and interrogation, the two men flew back to Washington. They reported immediately to the National Security Council.

Krulack told the assembled dignitaries the war was going beautifully, that the regime was beloved by the people and that we need have no undue concern over about Nhu.

Mendenhall told them that South Vietnam was in a desperate state, that the regime was on the edge of collapse and that Nhu had to go. The President listened politely and finally said, "Were you two gentlemen in the same country?"

An attack on the Buddist pagodas in August, just before the arrival of Henry Cabot Lodge as the new American Ambassador, crystallized the disaffection of Diem's generals.

Lodge now began his Saigon tour with the usual calls on Diem and Nhu. When he got nowhere with them, he stopped calling on them. "They have not done anything I asked," he would explain. "They know what I want. Why should I keep asking? Let them come to ask me."

The anti-Diem section of the Embassy and American press in Saigon, enormously cheered, said to each other: "Our mandarin is going to beat their mandarin." Lodge kept calling Washington that the situation was getting worse and that the time had arrived for the United tSates to increase its pressure. He recommended in particular the suspension of American aid.

Selective Aid Suspension

Early in October a selective suspension went quietly into effect. It was hoped that the absence of publicity would encourage Diem to do something about the Nhus and the Buddhists without seeming to act under pressure and thereby losing face.

But in due course, the Vietnamese bitterly announced the suspension themselves. Madame Nhu now appeared in the United States to lobby against the new policy; for a moment she won support from right-wing politicians, though in the end her extravagances injured her own cause.

As for Diem, there is some suggestion that the program of pressure, so belatedly adopted, was having impact. It was too late. On Nov. 1 the generals struck. Diem and Nhu were murdered, and the history of Vietnam entered a new phase.

It is important to state clearly that the coup was entirely planned and carried out by the Vietnamese. Neither the American Embassy nor the CIA were involved in instigation or execution. Coup rumors, epidemic in Saigon since 1960, had begun to rise again toward the end of October; and on Oct. 29 the National Security Council met to consider American policy in the event that a coup should take place.

The Attorney General characterized the reports as very thin. The President, noting that the pro-Diem and anti-Diem forces seemed about equal, observed that any American action under such conditions would be silly.

If Lodge agreed, the President said, we should instruct him to discourage a coup. But Lodge knew little more than he had reported to Washington. Indeed, on the morning of Nov. 1 he actually took Admiral Felt to call on Diem — an incident which alarmed the conspirators who, knowing Diem's gift for long-distance talking, feared he would detain his visitors past 1:30 in the afternoon, when the revolt was scheduled to begin.

Military Resentment

What lay behind the coup was not the meddling of Americans, quiet or ugly, but the long history of Vietnamese military resentment against Diem, compounded now by the fear that Nhu, with his admiration for totalitarian methods of organization, might try to transform South Vietnam into a police state.

It was almost inevitable that, at one point or another, the generals would turn against so arbitrary and irrational a regime. As Lodge later put it, the coup was like a rock rolling downhill. It could have been stopped only by aggressive American intervention, against the army on behalf of Diem and the Nhus. This course few Americans in Saigon or Washington were willing to recommend.

I saw the President soon after he heard that Diem and Nhu were dead. He was somber and shaken. I had not seen him so depressed since the Bay of Pigs. No doubt he realized that Vietnam was his great failure in foreign policy, and that he had never really given it his full attention.

But the fact that the Vietnamese seemed ready to fight had made him feel that there was a reasonable chance of making a go of it; and then the optimism of 1962 had carried him along. Yet, with his memory of the French in Indochina in 1954, he had always believed there was a point at which our intervention might turn Vietnamese nationalism against us and transform an Asian civil conflict into a white man's war. When he came into office, 2000 American troops were in Vietnam. Now there were 16,000. How many more could there be before we passed the point?

By 1961 choices had already fatally narrowed; but still, if Vietnam had been handled as a political rather than a military problem, if Washington had not accepted the optimistic reports of our own generals for so long, if Diem had been subjected to tactful pressure rather than treated with uncritical respect, if Lodge had gone to Saigon in 1961 instead of 1963, if, if, if— and now it was all past, and Diem miserably dead.

The Saigon generals were claiming that he had killed himself; but the President, shaking his head, doubted that, as a Catholic, he would have taken this way out.

He said that Diem had fought for his country for 20 years and that it should not have ended like this.

Next week: *Autumn, 1963.*